

American Theater, Lost and Found

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When the lights went down at the TriBeCa Performing Arts Center for a series of readings earlier this week, characters like Pocahontas took the stage in new short plays with vintage twists. The works had drawn from the hugely neglected legacy of American popular drama from the American Revolution to World War I, which gave birth to many of the themes and characters that still linger in popular culture.

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Jennifer S. Altman for The New York Times
Lynn Thomson, with arms folded, shown with America-in-Play writers.

The audience heard Erin Browne's "Farmer's Quartette," her take on the enduring American theme of the contrast between city and country. Ms. Browne's work was "borrowed from and inspired" by Denman Thompson's 1886 play "The Old Homestead." Likewise, "The Next Big Thing," by Jenny Levison, about a New York socialite who longs to adopt a baby from abroad, was inspired by "Fashion," by Anna Cora Mowatt, an 1845 comedy about high society.

"These plays represent our shared cultural inheritance," Lynn M. Thomson, the founder and artistic director of a project called America-in-Play, told the audience. The 10-minute plays and monologues, which were read by actors, were created over a year, Ms. Thomson said. The idea is that by reading and studying these forgotten plays, writers get a better sense of America's common culture, which in turns enriches playwriting.

America-in-Play is one of the artist-in-residence programs at the center. Tuesday night's reading of work by six playwrights represented the first in a series. The final two are set for Monday and Tuesday, showcasing the work of 16 playwrights who spent eight workshops studying some 50 vintage plays and delving into topics like the history of the minstrel show, the iconographic cartoons of the period and paintings from the Hudson River School.

"For a variety of reasons, we have neglected our own cultural history," Ms. Thomson said in an interview. "American writers have struggled. It's hard to have a rich life with no past. We need a shared cultural vocabulary to talk to each other, to discover in a new way what we share."

They're not after revivals, Ms. Thomson said. "I'm talking about understanding our vocabulary and using it for new work."

Most of the playwrights in the project had all been taught that true American drama began with Eugene O'Neill, Ms. Thomson said. They knew little or nothing of earlier work that explored archetypes like the stage Yankee or such near-forgotten genres as the race

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dramas of the Civil War era.

Ms. Thomson has taught, directed and developed new plays and now teaches theater at [Brooklyn College](#). She gained some notoriety for arguing that she was owed partial authorship credit for the hit show “Rent,” on which she served as dramaturg; her lawsuit was settled in 1998.

For America-in-Play, she hopes eventually to commission full-length plays. It would be the culmination of a process that Ms. Thomson traces to 1991, when she stumbled on the old plays while working on her dissertation on George S. Kaufman at [New York University](#).

In several dusty library boxes, she found “Columbia Readex Microprint of Early American Plays, 1831-1900.” Over the next few years, Ms. Thomson sought out other examples of early American theater. From anthologies, she already knew “The Contrast” (1787) by Royall Tyler and “Fashion,” but eventually unearthed other plays like “The Stage-Struck Yankee” by Oliver Durivage (1847) and “The Vermont Wool-Dealer” by Cornelius Logan (1838).

In 2005, after Ms. Thomson landed a two-year residency at the TriBeCa center to write a musical, she was also able to begin assembling the America-in-Play project. A flier went out soliciting playwrights; those responding ranged from a tenured professor to Ms. Browne, a graduate student at [Columbia University](#).

“People are always saying theater is dead,” Ms. Browne said. “But this is making me realize how many groundbreaking things happen in theater. We read a play about the American Revolution from the British point of view; we saw recurring stereotypes about Pocahontas.”

C. S. Hanson wrote a comedy called “Falutin” about an affair between two orchestra members that is inspired by “The Vermont Wool-Dealer.”

“So many of the early plays were about a divided country — city versus country, people who looked to England,” Ms. Hanson said. “People struggled with the same issues of identity that we face now.”

One reason the past is neglected is that it’s complicated, suggested Dominic Taylor, a playwright who is also the associate artistic director of America-in-Play. On Tuesday night there was a reading of his “Literal Lineage,” in which the African-American abolitionist Maria Stewart confronts Glen, a character from “The Escape, or a Leap for Freedom,” an 1858 play by William Wells Brown.

“There are more complicated questions about race and identity than we want to confront,” said Mr. Taylor, who teaches playwriting at [Bard College](#). “For example, blackface started in 1829 with a character named Jim Crow, and I know people who grew up in the Jim Crow South who don’t know where the phrase came from. Why perform in blackface? Why is it that minstrelsy is arguably the first American art form that gained international popularity?”

Morgan Jenness, a dramaturg who spent more than a decade at the New York Shakespeare Festival and the [Public Theater](#) and is on the board of advisers to the America-in-Play project, called the idea of new playwrights exploring this vintage material a thrilling one.

“I think it’s an exploration that is really resonant right now because the continued shifting of the U.S. identity is so crucial — who are we really?” she wrote in an e-mail message. “From the anti-Tory Revolutionary War plays of Mercy Otis Warren to the whole Philadelphia group, to the playwrights Frederick Forrest commissioned to write roles for himself, to the pre- and post-Civil war melodramas dealing with race, to the immigrant ‘ethnic’ works of the late 19th century, all of them are key in the reflection and molding of the American identity.”



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Todd London, the executive director of New Dramatists, put it this way: "Playwrights are writing plays based on types they don't even know. It's always good to reconnect. A novelist who writes American realistic novels would not sit down without knowing Dreiser or Hemingway."

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